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ABSTRACT

A conscious understanding of the grammar system can have value for student writers. Unfortunately, the positive value of teaching grammar in an instrumental, or functional, way has been overshadowed by the negative and irrelevant data concerning "formal grammar." However, if teachers were to use "rhetorical grammar" and emphasize the importance of grammar to rhetoric, they could help student writers to understand the choices available to them and to recognize the effects those choices will have in their writing. Instruction could begin by teaching students sentence sense--that sentence patterns are a series of required slots filled by a variety of forms. Every sentence also has optional slots--places for adverbials and sentence modifiers of various forms. The teacher and students can then examine the way sentence openers change the rhythm; how they slow the reader down or change the reader's expectations; how they work as transition signals. Time should also be spent on coordinate structures and on sentence focus--on how to decide if an idea should be subordinated. Teaching students this conscious understanding, or rhetorical grammar, can be a way of illuminating the choices that language provides. (HOD)

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Rhetorical Grammar for Students*

by

Martha Kolln

As the first speaker today, I've decided to help my colleagues on the panel get the most out of their twenty minutes by using part of my time to state some axioms about grammar--assumptions that I hope we all share.

My first axiom is this: To speak a language is to "have" a grammar--an intuitive system of rules that enables a normal human being to generate the sentences of a language, or, to be exact, the sentences of a particular dialect.

Second, the grammar--or system--of standard written English, which is similar to that of the spoken language, includes established, agreed-upon conventions; further, as with speech, the conventions of writing that are appropriate in one situation or context may be inappropriate in another.

Third, understanding that grammar system in a conscious way has value for writers; writing, after all, is a conscious activity.

I suspect that only the third of my axioms needs to be explained or defended. I included the first--that all of us who speak English, or any language, have an internalized set of rules we call grammar--because at a convention session on the subject of grammar last year, a member of the audience

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claimed that her students were poor writers because they couldn't put together a grammatical sentence in speech--a downright stupid remark, and certainly an insensitive one, especially from an English teacher. But I trust that axiom one is, indeed, self-evident to all of us here today.

I'm sure that my second axiom is also one that we concur with: that appropriateness and correctness are relative. Certainly all of us have different ways of speaking that are appropriate in different situations; such relativity applies also to writing. I include this axiom because of its connection to rhetoric.

It's that third axiom that gives people trouble: that an understanding of grammar can be of value to the writer. On this issue I'd like to make two points.

First, let me assure you that in spite of what you may have heard or read, there is simply no empirical evidence to show that the teaching of grammar is a waste of time. It's true that there are research studies that make such claims. They get a good share of space in our journals--and they get quoted and misquoted over and over again. So if you're skeptical about axiom three, I certainly understand. It's always hard to believe there's no fire in the house when smoke keeps pouring out the windows.

So let me explain. The major studies that have come up with those negative results generally have compared two groups of composition students--some of whom study grammar and others who do not. But let me ask you this: What do you suppose those grammar classes were like? How did they teach grammar in those experimental sections?

Well, how would you design a curriculum to discover if knowledge of grammar would help your students write better? Let me tell you what I would do. First, I'd try to identify the stages in the writing process where a conscious knowledge of grammar might help a writer. I'd probably decide that such knowledge would be useful in understanding sentence structure and paragraph coherence and point of view, in thinking about

style and revision and even--as our fourth speaker will tell us--in invention. So in my experimental study, I'd help the grammar group understand the structure of sentences using all the tricks up my sleeve. And I would encourage them to use that conscious knowledge as they put together their sentences and paragraphs, and as they're revising and considering punctuation, and so on.

That's what I'd do.

But that's not what the researchers you read about did. They did things differently--and I think it's very clear why they did things differently. Their purpose was different.

The purpose of the Harris study in 1960--one of the most widely quoted of all--and the purpose of the well-known study by Elley and others, carried out in New Zealand, were not to discover ways of teaching grammar that could benefit student writers.[1] On the contrary, the purpose was to prove that grammar would not help them.

The students in the grammar curriculums did not study grammar as I described it--that is, by using it in their composition class to help improve their writing. They studied grammar in a separate class, in a completely nonrhetorical way, apart from composition, a method called "formal grammar." And if you read the findings of the research, you'll discover that the conclusions state exactly that: Studying "formal grammar" does not improve writing.

But no one teaches grammar like that anymore. No one has taught grammar like that for decades. And no one advocates teaching grammar like that--certainly no one on this panel.

In some of the studies--including the one by Harris--both groups learned grammar. The composition groups studied what we call functional grammar, or grammar in connection with writing. And in his conclusions, Harris certainly didn't say you shouldn't teach grammar; what he said you shouldn't teach was "formal grammar." But, as I said earlier, no one does that anymore anyway--except in studies that are designed to prove that it doesn't work.

Harris's findings about formal grammar simply repeated what the NCTE had said back in 1935, when its curriculum commission called for an end to classes in formal grammar. In fact, the criticism of formal grammar goes back even further--at least to 1906, a time when such classes were common, even in the early grades.[2] But those long-ago reports certainly did not advocate abolishing grammar. The purpose of the NCTE commission back in the early 1930s was to study the language arts curriculum at all levels, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and to make recommendations.

In their report, the commission recommended doing away with formal grammar and replacing it with a method then called "instrumental grammar."[3] Their plan called for grammar instruction to be integrated with writing instruction; the recommendations include twenty-five objectives, ranging from adverbials, beginning in the second grade, to such concepts as voice and parallelism and the subjunctive mood in twelfth grade.

Please notice what has happened. The positive value of teaching grammar in this instrumental, or functional, way has been overshadowed by all of those negative and irrelevant data concerning "formal grammar." I've pointed out before that we have a problem of definition when we talk about teaching grammar--a problem of defining our terms to make sure that we're all talking about the same thing.[4]

Let me repeat axiom three: Understanding the grammar system in a conscious way has value for writers. Believe me, I'm not asking you to accept this axiom in the face of evidence to the contrary. <u>There is no evidence</u>. Those negative findings you hear about refer only to that separate "formal grammar" class. And I should also mention that in many of the studies the research design and the testing devices render the findings absolutely worthless, no matter what the question being asked. [Note: This point is emphasized in my article referred to in note four.]

This question of research design brings me to my second point. A few moments ago I described how I would design a study

to see if an understanding of grammar was valuable for student writers. I said that I'd look for those places in the composing process where knowing sentence structure would help the students write better. That's precisely what I do in my composition classes. I call that method "rhetorical grammar."

I use the word rhetorical for two reasons: First, I want to contrast it with the usual label we append to grammar: "remedial." We're so used to thinking of grammar lessons as remedies--as ways to correct or avoid errors--we've forgotten about its potential as a rhetorical tool.

Think for a moment about the occasions when you teach grammar in your composition class--if you do. Maybe you're finding a lot of comma splices in your students' papers; maybe you've discovered that no one seems to understand semicolons; or maybe fragments are popping up everywhere; or too many simple sentences; or some other problem. It's obviously time for a grammar lesson.

Even our textbooks concentrate on remedy. You don't find chapter titles that read "Using commas effectively" or "How to make participles work for you." You find headings like "Comma splices" and "Sentence fragments" and "Avoiding loose compound sentences." We'll be hearing more about this and other problems with textbooks from our third speaker.

So one reason I use the phrase "rhetorical grammar" is to wean us away from this notion of grammar as remedy. But the main reason is to emphasize the importance of grammar to rhetoric: to help student writers understand consciously the choices available to them and to recognize the effects those choices will have.

I should mention here that sentence combining is one way of teaching rhetorical grammar--at least, it can be. The sentence combiners don't admit to teaching grammar, of course; they say they're teaching writing. In fact, Frank O'Hare, in his well-known work on sentence combining envisioned it as the ideal method for the teacher who--and these are his words--the

"teacher who simply doesn't like grammar."[5] But even our current sentence combinineers tell themselves and their students that they're not teaching grammar. Even those who include traditional terminology, as O'Hare did not, take pains to assure students that it's o.k. if they don't study grammar.

Here's a passage from the introduction to the best of the sentence-combining texts, The Writer's Options:

> Studying grammar, analyzing essays, and reading books about writing--all these may be useful activities, but they are not the most efficient way to become a better writer. Writing is.[6]

I said that sentence combining is a way of teaching rhetorical grammar. Unfortunately, it's an inefficient way. It treats college students like kindergartners. I was struck by that resemblance recently while reading a New York Times article on the use of computers in teaching little children to write. Here's a story composed by a six-year-old on a word processor:

> Cat likes dogs.
> A thum is big.
> A bell is big.
> A banana is big.
> I love you Jason.

In sentence-combining exercises, college students are given sentences very much like those--the sentences of six-year-olds--and instructed to put them into their own, adult, language, sometimes with specific instructions, sometimes without. I have no quarrel with the aims of sentence combining--only with their time-consuming, inefficient methods. The students would be better off with a straightforward grammar lesson on how appositives and participles and relative clauses work in their language. If only the sentence combiners could bring themselves to admit that they're teaching grammar, I guarantee they'd find a better way to do it.

The sentence combiners are not alone in trying to distance themselves from grammar, of course. Our whole profession is almost paranoid about it--at least about the word grammar. I'm sure that the problem goes back to the days of those formal grammar classes I mentioned earlier--that period set aside to parse and diagram sentences and to memorize rules, to hear about the do's and the don't's.

In the wake of all the criticism of that formal teaching method, the terms "formal grammar" and "grammar" came to have the same meaning. But instead of making the distinction clear, we have chosen to avoid the word. In 1976, for example, the NCTE published a document called "A Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English and the Language Arts," a twelve-page report outlining the skills and background and education that English teachers should have. The word grammar does not appear in that report.

But in my classes I do use the word. I tell my students right off that we're going to study grammar, that we're going to examine sentences in a conscious way--the sentences that they produce unconsciously. That's what the study of grammar is.

One early lesson covers sentence sense. I teach sentence patterns as a series of required slots filled by a variety of forms. Like the sentence combiners, we start with simple sentences, but then we expand the slots in deliberate and varied ways. Along with this lesson on sentence patterns, the students learn a powerful punctuation rule: There are no commas between the required slots.

Every sentence also has optional slots--places for adverbials and sentence modifiers of various forms: adverbs, prepositional phrases, verb phrase, and clauses. We examine the way sentence openers change the rhythm; how they slow the reader down or change the reader's expectations; how they work as transition signals.

I teach the noun phrase in the same way--as a series of slots filled by various forms, many of which are the same forms

that filled the adverbial slots--prepositional phrases, verb phrases, clauses. The students also learn the terminology that enables them to think about and talk about the structures. And always I emphasize what we do automatically as native speakers

For instance, native speakers automatically put adjectives before noun headwords; they automatically put modifying nouns between the adjective and the noun headword. They say

the yellow alley cat

not

the alley yellow cat.

And they automatically put prepositional phrases after the headword. They certainly don't need to practice combining

The cat is yellow.
The cat is from the alley.
The cat is on the porch.

to come up with

the yellow alley cat on the porch.

That system is already a part of their grammar; there's simply no alternative for a native speaker.

In my class we spend our time on the modifiers that we don't use automatically--like the nonrestrictive phrases and clauses that we rarely use in speech--and on those structures that are movable, where rhetorical choice is involved. And we spend time on coordinate structures and on sentence focus--on whether an idea should be subordinated, on how to decide. We spend a great deal of time listening to sentences--to their rhythm and stress patterns; we think about reader expectation.

A word we hear a great deal these days in our discipline is "process." As you know, an important step in the writing process is revising and editing. We encourage our students to tinker with their prose. We even bring into the classroom

examples of our own tinkerings--the messier the better--to assure them that it's o.k.; everyone does it. And we hold rough draft workshops where students learn to tinker with each other's prose.

But how do we teach the process? How do we teach them to do that revising and editing? I suspect that some of our students look at their compositions in much the same way that I look at football games. When I look down at the field, I simply don't see what the experts see. I'm usually satisfied just to keep track of the ball. I don t have labels for all the things that are happening out there. Consequently I don't see them. I really don't see the wide sweep and the option play and the safety blitz. I don't see the patterns; I don't understand the parts.

Unless we teach our students to recognize and understand the parts, how can we teach them to understand and revise the whole?

Teaching students this conscious understanding of the whole is what I call rhetorical grammar. It is a way of illuminating the choices that our language provides, a way of putting the control of language into the hands of our student writers. As I see it, that's what our job as composition teachers is all about.

Notes

[1]The study by Roland J. Harris ["An Experimental Inquiry into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of Written English to Children Aged Twelve to Fourteen"] is summarized in Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963) pp. 70-83. The reference for the New Zealand study is as follows: W. B. Elley, I. H. Barham, H. Lamb, and M. Wyllie, "The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School English Curriculum," Research in the Teaching of English, 10 (1976), 5-21.

[2]For the reference to the 1906 study and others, along with my summaries and criticisms of those studies, see Martha Kolln, "Closing the Books on Alchemy," CCC, 32 (May 1981), pp. 139-151.

[3]W. Wilbur Hatfield, Chairman, An Experience Curriculum in English (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1935).

[4]See "Closing the Books on Alchemy," referred to in Note 2. See also the counterstatements published in CCC in December 1983, pp. 491-500.

[5]Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction, NCTE Research Monograph, No. 15 (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1973).

[6]Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, Max Morenberg, The Writer's Options, 2nd Edition (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982), p. 1.